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ABSTRACT

This kit contains two components which will help teachers and librarians become aware of the problems of ageism in literature and examine materials currently in use. The first component, entitled "Problems of Ageism in Literature," is a brief, but comprehensive, position paper on the particular ways in which literature may adversely affect the reader's attitudes about aging and older people. Literature has contributed toward educating children to the beliefs that older people are unimportant and that the later years are not an enjoyable time of life. This is also damaging to the elderly, as it destroys their self-esteem. Stereotyping of our older population is so subtle and so pervasive that replacing current ideas with factual information and positive attitudes is an enormous task for teachers. Educators should not condemn all the literature containing stereotypic images or remove these books from the shelves. They must be sensitive to the issue of ageism and utilize critical-reading skills in evaluating prejudice. Things to look for in literature include illustrations, personality traits older people are said to have, their physical traits, behavioral characteristics, occupational role, character role, and ethnic and racial composition. The second component "Analyzing Literature for Ageism" offers a set of guidelines, instructions, and a simple instrument for analyzing materials in terms of ageist content. (Author/RM)

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AGEISM IN LITERATURE

AN ANALYSIS KIT FOR
TEACHERS AND LIBRARIANS

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TEACHING AND LEARNING ABOUT AGING

McCARTHY-TOWNE SCHOOL, ACTON, MA 01720 (617) 263-8773

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INTRODUCTION

Over the past few years, authors, publishers, librarians and educators have become sensitized to the ways in which literature can serve as a medium for conveying bias about particular groups in society. Considerable effort has gone into closely examining the books and curriculum materials placed in children's hands in terms of how fairly they portray women and various minority, ethnic, racial, and religious groups. Until now, there has been surprisingly little attention given to literary portrayal of one of society's largest minorities, the elderly.

Research demonstrates that most young people, including very young children, tend to hold strongly negative attitudes about aging and about older people in general. They tend to see elders as stereotypes and not as individuals. While undoubtedly there are many factors contributing to this, certainly what children read or hear read to them plays an important role in shaping the way they perceive older people.

Recent studies of children's literature and curriculum materials reveal that older people are often portrayed in both text and illustrations as unhealthy, ugly, eccentric, passive, and dependent on others. Like racism and sexism, ageism appears in subtle ways and probably most often is not intentional on the part of the author or illustrator. Ageism finds its way into literature simply because authors and illustrators reflect patterns of thought that are entrenched in the culture.

It is only by being sensitive to the problem and by deliberately examining material that biases or prejudices can be brought to light and dealt with. Remedial steps may take the form of revising or replacing the biased material or simply supplementing it with other material to provide a better balance. Whatever action is taken, however, the first steps are to recognize the problem and carefully analyze the material in question.

The following two components are to meet that need:

- PROBLEMS OF AGEISM IN LITERATURE is a brief, but comprehensive, position paper on the particular ways in which literature may adversely affect the reader's attitudes about aging and older people.

- ANALYZING LITERATURE FOR AGEISM offers a set of guidelines, instructions, and a simple instrument for analyzing materials in terms of ageist content.

An additional component, "REALISTIC" PORTRAYAL OF AGING, is also available from the TLA Project. It is an annotated bibliography of more than 500 fiction and non-fiction books recommended for use. Materials are divided into three levels: kindergarten-third grade, fourth-sixth grades, and seventh grade-adult.

Together, these components provide the means by which educators and librarians can become aware of the problems of ageism in literature, examine materials currently in use, and make informed decisions about new materials to be purchased and used.

PROBLEMS OF AGEISM IN LITERATURE

"We should all be concerned about the future because we will have to spend the rest of our lives there."

Charles F. Kettering

Today, the fastest growing minority in the world is "senior citizens." Their voices are being heard in all facets of society--the economy, politics, the sciences, the media, and education. While we have become sensitive to the issues of racism and sexism, we have neglected to confront the needs of our older population. Aging is viewed as a leveler of individual differences, placing all elders into a collective unit. However, aging, like race and sex, is not a matter of choice. It is inevitable for all.

As educators, we must be concerned with the stereotyping of the older generation. Through reading, the basis of all curriculum, we can confront this problem, for literature is an important means through which the attitudes and values of a society are transmitted to its members. Yet, an analysis of past and present literature shows that the aged have been stereotyped and portrayed negatively. By not assigning them a full range of human behaviors, emotions, and roles, authors have categorized them, resulting in "ageism." This term is currently being used to refer to discrimination against the elderly.

Literature conveys writers' and society's stereotypic and negative images when:

1. Authors consistently use adjectives such as "old," "poor," "little," "sad," and "wise" to refer to the elderly.
2. Older men are depicted with wrinkles, white hair, and canes, while older women are portrayed as fat or skinny, with their hair in "buns" and wearing aprons.
3. Senility is considered to be synonomous with old age.
4. The aged are pictured as sitting in rocking chairs or engaged in passive roles, such as storytelling, fishing, or housekeeping.
5. Personality is characterized in two forms--crotchety or unfailingly pleasant.

To confront the issue of ageism in literature and to determine its extent, we visited public, college, and school libraries, as well as bookstores. Approximately eight hundred books from the kindergarten through adult levels were investigated. The following conclusions were reached.

Insignificance of Elderly

Currently in America, men and women, aged sixty-five or older, represent over eleven percent of the total population. This figure is steadily rising. In literature, however, they are not proportionately represented to their general occurrence in the population. Furthermore, while older women outnumber older men by a ratio of 100 to 69, they appear less frequently than their male counterparts in books. In the materials surveyed that were published prior to 1965, there was a noticeable lack of portrayal of the elderly. When they did appear, they were unrealistically developed. During the next decade some individualization was given to older characters, particularly males. Since 1975 their inclusion in books has increased, but they are still not represented in proportion to their actual numbers in society.

Ethnic and Racial Composition

When older characters appear in literature, the vast majority are white. Ethnic and racial minorities tend to be stereotyped to an even greater degree, assuming roles that are even more typecast than whites. While some behaviors are not inaccurate, they are shown in exclusion to others. For example, Asian-Americans operate laundries or gift shops or participate in dragon festivals, while Blacks appear in servile roles.

Character Role

Until recently, older people have rarely been visible as main characters. They have been peripheral, introduced irregularly in minor roles. Their major characterizations have been as grandparents or other relatives. Grandparents are generally cast as bedtime storytellers and then disappear. In children's picture books, older people outside the family structure are seldom represented. The situation is somewhat improved in adolescent and adult literature, but it is still uncommon for an older person to be depicted realistically or to be assuming a significant role in the story.

With the mobility of our society and with the growing number of single-parent homes, many children and young adults have little, if any, contact with the elderly. Literature is one means by which they can come to know older people and to learn that they are valuable contributors to everyday life.

Occupational Role

The majority of older characters are placed in indeterminate occupational roles or those that require only passive participation. Fishing, walking, and listening are examples. When there is obvious employment, the positions require little mental acuity or are outside the experiences of the average student. Women's roles are repetitive. They are generally engaged in housework or gardening.

To foster the idea that they are contributing members of society, older persons should be shown in a diversity of meaningful occupations and employment settings.

Behavioral Characteristics

The types of behaviors exhibited by older people in literature tend to be routine and mundane. In children's picture books, the elderly usually create problems rather than solve them. All levels of literature portray the aged as less self-reliant and less healthy than other adults. Thus, a gloomy cast to the aging process is instilled in the reader.

Women have been portrayed in two distinctly opposite roles, both stereotyped instead of realistic. They have been either the subservient nurturers, helping and serving their family, but never being developed as individuals in their own right, or they have acted too aggressively, resulting in the "nagging wife" or the stereotyped "witch."

Individual behaviors do not suddenly change when one becomes a "senior citizen." According this group a variety of behavioral characteristics must be the goal of literature.

Physical Traits

Older characters are rarely given fully developed physical descriptions. Instead, they are described by three adjectives--"old," "little," and "ancient." "Old" is used approximately seventy-five percent of the time. No other generation is completely described by the use of one word.

Personality Traits

Like their physical traits, personality descriptions are limited to four adjectives--"poor," "sad," "wise," and "dear." These terms suggest an ambivalence to growing older. However, this juxtaposition does not give older persons a full range of emotions with the opportunity for continued growth.

Illustrations

Older characters appear less frequently in illustrations than their younger counterpart . They generally are shown with others rather than alone. It is extremely rare to have them portrayed in social communication with their peers. When they are seen in picture books, grandparents are often illustrated as being unrealistically old. It is not plausible for a five-year-old child to have a toddering, white-haired grandfather carrying a cane and wearing clothes reminiscent of another era. In all levels of materials, features are accentuated to the point of grotesqueness, thus providing a frightening effect instead of one of endearment. Encouragingly, some recent publications have contained life-like illustrations and photographs lending reality to these individuals.

Conclusion

In summary, literature has contributed toward educating children to the beliefs that older people are unimportant and that the later years are not an enjoyable time of life. This is also damaging to the elderly, as it destroys their self-esteem. Stereotyping of our older population is so subtle and so pervasive that replacing current ideas with factual information and positive attitudes is an enormous task for teachers. Educators should not condemn all the literature containing stereotypic images or remove these books from the shelves. They must be sensitive to the issue of ageism and utilize critical reading skills in evaluating prejudice.

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ANALYZING LITERATURE FOR AGEISM

"No wise man ever wished to be younger."

Jonathan Swift

To clarify the task of actually analyzing literature for ageism and making informed decisions on the purchase and use of particular works, an efficient Analysis Form was developed and tested. Teachers and librarians using it had a number of questions:

How do I "rate" or "rank" books?

What if illustrations are poor or inappropriate, but the text is excellent?

Do I "ban" books already available because they are ageist?

Who should "rate" the books?

Should the "ratings" be available to the public?

How can the form be used most constructively?

The experiences of the authors and of teachers in the Acton-Boxborough, Massachusetts, schools helped answer these questions. The following examples are based on our experience.

A high school social studies department, with a limited budget, may need to select two books on aging to use with all classes. Eight books are read and reviewed by the department teachers. They meet, compare ratings, and discuss the relative strengths of the books. Their consensus is to choose one fiction book focusing on aging in other cultures and one non-fiction text that surveys American attitudes toward aging.

An elementary school librarian may wish to choose picture books featuring realistic rather than "ugly" or passive illustrations of older persons. She feels that, at this level, illustrations are more important than text. She works with a committee, including teachers, a parent, and a senior citizen volunteer. Using the TLA Bibliography, dozens of books available from local libraries are gathered, reviewed and discussed in a half-day session. Recommendations for purchase are made.*

Librarians can conduct workshops for teachers, at both elementary and secondary levels. After a brief introductory lecture, teachers read and rate books and discuss results. They leave with a greater awareness of ageism in literature and ways to combat it.

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*A comprehensive annotated bibliography, entitled "'Realistic' Portrayal of Aging," is available from the TLA Project.

In a sociology class, a number of books with varying ratings can be used as a reading list for student reports. To build sensitivity toward ageism, students are given copies of the evaluation form and expected to use it as a basis for reports.

Based on our experience, these steps are suggested for use of the Guidelines and Analysis Form.

1. Review the Guidelines, which summarize conclusions of the preceding paper.
2. Reproduce copies of the Analysis Form.
3. Read a few books, rating each as you complete it. Note that not all questions will apply to every book.
4. Make a chart, comparing the total number of 1's, 2's, and 3's for each book.
5. Rank the books. Those with most 3's will obviously be preferred. If scores are mixed, compare the strengths and weaknesses of different books, and consider their use in the classroom. You may want to choose books with strengths in different areas, keeping in mind other areas of possible bias--racism, national origin, and sexism.
6. Decide which books you will use.
7. Keep a file of all books reviewed.

Please Note: Books that score low should not necessarily be eliminated. You can expect few books to rate all 3's. Books that have some ageist characteristics may have other advantages, and they can be used to contrast to more positive texts. Remember that each evaluation reflects the opinion of one reviewer. Its validity and reliability are only relative. This is an analysis, not an evaluation method, and you are assessing the relative strengths and weaknesses of texts. Only you can decide how to utilize the materials in the classroom most effectively.

GUIDELINES

The elderly should be represented in literature in PROPORTION to their numbers in society.

Among the older people depicted in literature, all ETHNIC and RACIAL GROUPS should be represented and should not be given stereotypic roles.

Older people should be portrayed at all ECONOMIC LEVELS -- affluent, middle-class, and poor.

The older people should be accorded a RANGE OF ROLES from that of main to peripheral characters.

Older men and women should be shown in a full range of MEANINGFUL OCCUPATIONS and SETTINGS.

The older person should be developed as a UNIQUE individual who pursues a SPAN OF ACTIVITIES ranging from active to passive.

Literature should be more DESCRIPTIVE about the physical PROCESS OF AGING and accord it a balance of strengths and weaknesses; use of the word "old" is not sufficient to describe a person.

PERSONALITIES should be thoroughly developed by assigning the individuals a variety of activities and emotions instead of describing them with singular adjectives.

ILLUSTRATIONS of older characters' clothing, hairstyles, and mannerisms should be consistent with the TIME and setting of the story.

Older people should be ILLUSTRATED IN VARIED GROUPINGS --alone, in communication with peers, and with individuals from other age groups.

AGEISM IN LITERATURE ANALYSIS FORM

Title: _____

Author: _____

Publisher: _____ Copyright: _____

Grade Level(s): _____

Circle the number that you feel is appropriate for each item. It is not necessary to answer all items. 1 = poor, 2 = fair, 3 = good.

1. The older character plays a vital part in the story.	1	2	3
2. The older character's personality is fully developed.	1	2	3
3. The older character is self-reliant as opposed to being dependent.	1	2	3
4. The older character's physical appearance is fully described.	1	2	3
5. Stereotypic adjectives such as "old," "sad," and "poor" are not frequently or exclusively used in this book to refer to older people.	1	2	3
6. The older character's occupation is fully defined.	1	2	3
7. The older character's occupation is a meaningful one.	1	2	3
8. If not employed, the older character is engaged in worthwhile activities.	1	2	3
9. The older character is not engaged in stereotypic roles of his/her ethnic or racial group.	1	2	3
10. The older character is from outside the family unit.	1	2	3

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11. The older person is a three-dimensional character.	1	2	3
12. If illustrated, the illustrations are appropriate for the time and setting of the story.	1	2	3
13. If illustrated, the older character is illustrated in social communication with a variety of age groups.	1	2	3
14. If illustrated, all characters are pictured realistically.	1	2	3
15. Overall analysis of the book, in terms of portrayal of elderly persons.	1	2	3

TALLY: 1 = 2 = 3 =

Comments:

Name of Reviewer: _____

Date of Review: _____

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